

Drugs and Guns

In movies, it's clear when the camera is drunk: blurred vision, shaky motions, everything becoming slightly less clear. It's similarly obvious when the camera is on acid: rainbow colors, things melting into each other, and a sort of dazed gaze. Yet, despite the prevalence of pot, I've never seen a film or TV show where the camera is high on marijuana.

Perhaps that's because there's nothing to show. Some deep breaths, a slight tingling sensation, and then an odd feeling as if something is pressing on part of your brain, lifting your head up, making you happy. An odd happiness, to be sure, but a happiness nonetheless. Friends are unable to distinguish between when I've just gone skinnydipping and when I'm simply high. It's hard to show a camera being happy.

Contrast this with Omega-3 fatty acids, the fish oil acids that various new studies are supposed to show have all sorts of positive effects for your brain. When I swallowed a stack of Omega-3 pills, I felt as if I was crawling up into my head, living in there instead of plotting the next moves for my body. It made it pretty hard to get anything done.

In San Francisco, medical marijuana is perfectly legal and health-food culture makes Omega-3 practically mandatory, but possessing a gun is actually outlawed within city limits (even for off-duty cops). To actually discharge one you have to drive south of the border, where shooting ranges allow deprived northerners to partake of this recreational craze.

Unlike the flowing, hippie vibe of drug culture, gun culture is strictly utilitarian: concrete walls, fluorescent lights, drab carpeting. Tough-looking guys take your license and hand you a gun. First-timers go into the training room for a quick primer on how to use it, then you take your weapon, ammo, and target into the shooting range.

Most of the targets are pretty bland — vague silhouettes or bullseyes — but there was one frightening option that featured a blatantly stereotypical illustration of a hooded bad guy character holding a gun to a cute young girl's head. Normally descriptions of such pictures are more evocative than the pictures themselves, but this drawing was just about perfect.

Naturally, this was the target our neighbors on the shooting range had chosen and were now shooting at with enormous shotguns whose blasts shook the entire room. Meanwhile, I had a small handgun with a little bit of a kick and a simple silhouette.

My gun jammed the first couple of times I tried to shoot; I had to go through the process of unloading and reloading it several times before I even shot a single bullet. It's amazing how comically fake the actual gun feels when you do this — it makes all the noises and motions you'd expect from a gun, but it seems to lack any internal mechanisms for doing the actual shooting, like a prop for a movie.

When I finally did manage to get the gun working, I relaxed, aimed my weapon, and took ten shots at where I thought the bullseye was. (My long-distance eyesight is really terrible and I hadn't thought to bring my glasses until now, so I gave it my best shot.) I shot again and again, the pattern of kicking and aiming becoming almost rhythmic. When the gun was finally empty, I pushed the little button to whirr my target back to me. To my amazement, nearly all ten bullets had gone in right by the bullseye. My partner looked frightened.

What's odd about shooting is how, well, relaxing it is. Something about the furious action of the gun seems to drain you of all your nervous energy. And while, if you think about it, the item you're holding is a weapon of terrible destruction, there's very little visual evidence of that fact. Just as the gun feels like a prop, the whole thing feels like a game: aim, press the trigger, and some dots appear in a piece of paper. But when you're done you don't feel hyped-up like after a video game. Instead you feel as if what you actually discharged was your nervous energy.

We rolled up the bullet-ridden silhouette to take home as a souvenir. "Maybe I'll mail this to my mom," I said. "I don't think that's a very good idea," came the reply.

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